

Thomas McGeary. *The Politics of Opera in Handel's Britain*.

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In this detailed and well-referenced study, Thomas McGeary challenges much of the conventional musicological wisdom concerning the creation of opera in London during the first half of the eighteenth century. Particularly, he does so regarding those operas composed by G. F. Handel (1685–1759), who was then a dominating figure on the British opera stage. Thus, McGeary focuses on the years from 1710 to 1744, from Handel's first Italian opera in London (*Rinaldo*) to his last (*Deidamia*). McGeary introduces his readers to the turbulent politics of the time: the establishment of the Hanoverian dynasty in England, the disruptive intergenerational infighting within the royal family, the evolution of opposition Parliamentary politics in Britain, the controversial “reign” of Prime Minister Robert Walpole (1676–1745), and the evolution of public political debate through the pages of a lively partisan press.

In *The Politics of Opera*, McGeary has—it seems to this reviewer—highlighted a fundamental problem in the musicology of eighteenth-century Britain, which is that the great majority of its scholars came first to their subject either as performers or as avid listeners, and only later turned seriously to studying its history, and rarely under the guiding hand of expert academic historians of the period. Handel-scholarship is no exception. This well-trodden trajectory is unproblematic in the work of those who pursue a straightforward and enthusiastically antiquarian agenda in mining libraries and archives to make lists and databases of facts: autograph sources, catalogues of works, performance histories, correspondence, watermarks on paper, thematic analyses, and so on; what we might otherwise call the *here-is-everything-to-be-found-in-the-library* method of research. By these means, the “antiquarians” usually remain on firm—if occasionally tedious—ground, and in doing so they do valuable service to the wider historical community in bringing together essential source materials that are crucial to the interpretation of any historical subject. However, it is in the interpretation of this material in the wider socio-political context that musicologists' efforts are often less certain, and their methods less than robust. McGeary seems to be clear that in a number of cases,

some leading Handel scholars have not always been very good historians, and their conclusions do not always bear up under scrutiny. He does not balk at naming names.

For McGeary, a particular weakness in the study of Italian opera in eighteenth-century Britain has been the fact that otherwise well-respected musicologists have not appreciated the fundamental differences between the contexts in which Italian opera was produced in continental Europe versus London. The production of Handel's London operas was neither a straightforward homage to the powerful (as McGeary suggests was generally the case in continental Europe), nor a stern admonition of them (as he suggests was often the case in London's spoken theatres). Italian opera in London, he argues, arose from the coming together of a variety of aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical interests—albeit largely aristocratic and royal—but that it was reliant for its ultimate success on the support of the ticket-buying public. It served no single ideal, except perhaps simply to glorify Britain in presenting—for the greater public good—timeless tales of virtue and heroism set to some of the finest music then known in Europe. McGeary is clear that with very few exceptions, such as the obvious commemoration of royal events, the conventionally held view that the British promoters of Italian opera intended to allegorize or allude to contemporary political events and persons is wrong. Indeed, to reinforce his case, McGeary clearly identifies the very mixed political makeup of the elite groups that comprised the financial backers and management of the main British opera companies. In carefully unpacking the work of a number of high-profile Handel scholars, McGeary seeks to show their all too general, and often inconsistent, interpretations. In doing so, he judges their work by his own clear criteria for regarding a work of art as politically conceived: contemporary evidence of authorial intention; correspondence or commentaries; prefaces; dedications; or unique turns in otherwise standard plots in Italian operas.

For McGeary, a principal source for much of the scholarly error concerning early eighteenth-century British opera has been musicologists' all too ready and uncritical use of the British press as a source of contemporary commentary on opera itself, paying scant attention to the factional nature of contemporary newspapers. In particular, they have overlooked the political opposition's journalistic cannibalization of well-known cultural work, such as opera, to make hard-hitting allegorical and satirical attacks on those responsible for the state's domestic and foreign policy.

It cannot be doubted that *The Politics of Opera* will have ruffled more than a few Handelian feathers with its direct and confident style, but it is certain to become essential reading not only for those interested in new

directions for Handel scholarship but also for anyone with an interest in better understanding the impact of the turbulent political times on the cultural life of early eighteenth-century London. In challenging received wisdom and setting new directions, *The Politics of Opera in Handel's Britain* deserves a place alongside the equally pioneering (re)visionary work of William Webber: *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (OUP, 1996), and of Ruth Smith: *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (CUP, 2005).

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